

This Land: Work

I get it.

Driving along the Highline as they call it, heading west from Minot, North Dakota, along Route 2, the Great Northern Highway, I looked around and found myself at ground zero of the Dakota Access Pipeline operations. Goosenecks by the hundreds. Big offices for Baker Hughes Oilfield Resources and housing for the workers. Rows and rows of trailers. New apartment complexes. Expansive construction yards. Energy services and no trespassing signs. Company white pick-up trucks along the road. Billboards advertising: TETRA NOW HIRING JOIN OUR TEAM. Hundreds of storage tanks.

Up here, if it isn't farming or casinos I'm not sure how folks will make a living, pay a mortgage, take care of their family. I saw this even with y bias showing. How I do dislike casinos – heroin for old folks; Besides, who really does us more harm, the terrorist or a casino owner? Still, up along the Highline, if not farming or casinos I guess it has got to be pipelines. How then do you meet the need for a paycheck with due respect for sacred ground and the environment?

I get it, because that wasn't all that I saw while driving the highline.

There were small towns with plenty of handicapped ramps leading to the front door of paint-peeling and paint-chalking houses, indicating here lives someone disabled or elderly..

There were towns of run down identical government houses, 40' by 60'.

There was a disused football field with rusted goalposts.

On a hillside amongst a few farm houses sat a solitary church with a new pine wood ramp to the front door.

One billboard proclaimed: "Chase your dreams not meth. Not even once."

Another billboard advertised: "Domestic violence is not a native tradition."

A third promoted ten minute bail bonds.

I get it.

While driving through Ontario on my way into Michigan I listened to a radio talk show decrying the brain drain of the Canadian north, with the vast majority of the young people fleeing to the south for work and the chance to create new lives. Got to go where there's opportunity. We're always saying goodbye in order to say hello.

Returned the other day
From just another funeral
Adding up all the goodbyes
And all the hellos in our lives
My calculus figures within the heart
Too many numbers for my mind

Survivors find meaning in both
And I suppose the balance is just
Even when the balance isn't fair
But of the two I suppose
The hurt inside from the goodbyes
Is rarely softened by hellos

Which makes the Rabbi wise
Who said to the hurting:
How else can God's grace and love
Ever pressed upon the heart
Tumble inside the heart
Unless the heart is broken?

Another station I listened to one early morning broadcasted interviews with Alabamans laid off from work when their steel mill shut down. One man, a life-long veteran of the blast furnace, described how nobody wanted to hire a fifty year old man who took medication. Another fellow who was interviewed let his voice drift when he spoke of his daughter wanting to go to college but given what he's earning now, he has to tell her he doesn't know how they can pay for it.

If you ain't got the do-re-mi

I get it. Where's the square deal for fair pay today?

Woody Guthrie got it also. Take his song "Blowing Down That Old Dusty Road:"

*They say I'm a dust bowl refugee,
Yes, they say I'm a dust bowl refugee,
They say I'm a dust bowl refugee, Lord, Lord,
An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way.*

*I'm a-lookin' for a job at honest pay,
I'm a-lookin' for a job at honest pay,
I'm a-lookin' for a job at honest pay, Lord, Lord,
An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way.*

*My children need three square meals a day,
Now, my children need three square meals a day,
My children need three square meals a day, Lord,
An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way.*

*I'm a-goin' down this old dusty road,
I'm blowin' down this old dusty road,
I'm a-blowin' down this old dusty road, Lord, Lord,
An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way.*

Can't blame them. Woody's folks just wanted work. Decent work and decent pay. A chance to feed their families. They didn't want a bail-out. They didn't want the dole. They didn't need to make a million. They wanted a chance. They deserved a chance. Fair pay. Square deal.

Why is it the rich boast of success as a superior act of will? Circumstance plays a big role, right?

As Woody sang in another song, it isn't right that "*the gambling man is rich and the working man is poor.*"

No wonder some of Woody's people got angry. No wonder some just curled up defeated. No wonder they voted for Roosevelt, because he made jobs and turning the economy around his priority.

Whenever hostile clamor drowns out the higher calling of the public good, we enter the Bizzaro world of populism run amuck. Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, KKK, the German American Bund, George Wallace, La Follette – they each have shown us repeatedly a diseased strain in our national DNA: the danger of a populism lacking a larger ethos, a populism based on raw emotion rather than reason, on furor rather than fact.

Sounds familiar. Mighty familiar.

But Roosevelt tried to turn it around for Woody's people not by trying to recreate the bankrupt old but by creating something new.

Where is today's Roosevelt? Where is the modern Roosevelt. Who is it today? Maybe our government should tap someone to accept the job of being the New Economy Czar to work with the modern entrepreneurs to stimulate not the old industries but push, pull, inspire the United States toward new industries, new sciences, new agriculture.

If the government cannot speak to and for the Highline, they don't deserve Silicon Valley.

Worse: shares of Twitter, Facebook do not an economy make. They produce no durable commodity that can bolster a nation. New industry from the new sciences that can revolutionize our nation must. Stimulate worthwhile jobs!

Watching the PBS series on our National Parks sparked in me an appreciation how once upon a time a fellow from my small town could pack up and head west and start a new life. Where is the geographical opportunity today? What is a young man from Shamokin looking for opportunity to do? That is, if he or she still wants opportunity. A friend in my town who doctored amongst the Navaho in Tuba City taught me about what happens when you view yourself a conquered people. You react as a conquered people, what hillbilly author J.D. Vance called "a learned helplessness." You submit, self-destruct, or snarl!

Come to the front lines.

I performed a wedding in Mahanoy City and traveled Route 61 to get there. You want a bus tour to show how much you care? Travel that route. Notice the closed shops, the storefronts begging for leases, the houses you can purchase for \$15,000 because no one wants to live there.

Another week for another wedding I traveled up Route 11 from Berwick to Wilkes Barre. Come and sniff the fear, the anger, the frustration of dying towns boarded up. It ain't the floods killing the towns, it's the drought of real, durable economy. Please: a new Pizza joint in town won't save us. Our prosperity cannot depend on our children shining shoes or catering to tourists. Increasing the minimum wage won't cut it. That was designed as entry level. Our problem is that too many moms and dads in my world depend on entry level jobs to sustain their families. Even in my church world our growth is indexed to demographics. The only places thriving today are in the new suburbs. Not us who are rural, city, old suburbs, small town.

Once upon a time there were plenty of new frontiers to explore. Most were geographical. Except for space and the deep sea, we've explored most places on earth. Nowadays, the new frontiers are cultural, educational, economical, spiritual, technological, relational. Hence: far more complex.

I'm up for the challenge. Anyone else?